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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the testimony concerning special education reform and inclusion programs of the Director of Education and Employment Issues before a House of Representatives subcommittee. The speaker concludes that inclusion programs can work (as in districts in California, Kentucky, New York, and Vermont) but take tremendous effort and considerable resources. The advice given by many educators and parents to districts attempting such programs to "go slow," is noted. Educational reform and inclusion programs are seen as having a reciprocal relationship. Key conditions for successful inclusion programs are identified. These include: (1) a collaborative learning environment; (2) natural proportions of students with disabilities in their local education setting; (3) adequate support--including large numbers of aides and training--for classroom teachers, and (4) a philosophical reorientation, from defining special education as a place to defining special education as a service. General support of inclusion by teachers and parents (of both disabled and nondisabled students) is noted. Concerns are raised regarding the appropriateness of inclusion for students with severe emotional disturbances or with learning disabilities requiring a highly focused learning environment. Major questions still unanswered concern funding, access, equity, and the federal role. (DB)

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Districts Grapple With Inclusion Programs

Statement of Linda G. Morra
Director, Education and Employment Issues
Health, Education, and Human Services Division

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SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY BY LINDA G. MORRA
SPECIAL EDUCATION REFORM:
DISTRICTS GRAPPLE WITH INCLUSION PROGRAMS

INCLUSION PROGRAMS CAN WORK, BUT TAKE TREMENDOUS EFFORT AND CONSIDERABLE RESOURCES

In an inclusion program, a student--no matter what disability he or she may have--attends his or her home school with age and grade peers and receives in-school education services, with appropriate support in the general education classroom. We found the districts we visited in California, Kentucky, New York, and Vermont that embarked on education reform early had created an atmosphere where inclusion programs could grow and flourish. Many educators and parents we talked with gave one piece of advice to districts attempting inclusion programs: Go slow.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR ADDRESSING NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Parents, staff, and state officials perceived that the success of inclusion programs depends on attention being paid to creating and maintaining several key conditions: (1) a collaborative learning environment, (2) natural proportions of disabled students in their local education setting, (3) adequate support--including large numbers of aides and training--for classroom teachers, and (4) a philosophical reorientation--defining special education as a service, rather than a place.

PARENTS AND TEACHERS GENERALLY SUPPORTIVE OF INCLUSION

For students with disabilities, having good peer role models and being exposed to a broad curriculum led to perceived gains in the areas of social interaction, language development, appropriate behavior, and self-esteem. Academic progress was also noted. For the nondisabled students, parents and teachers perceived them becoming, generally, more compassionate, more helpful, and more friendly in relating to the disabled students.

INCLUSION NOT FOR ALL STUDENTS

We found that placement in an inclusion program depends on the individual needs of the student and not on the severity or type of disabling condition. However, all districts are struggling with the challenges of meeting the needs of (1) severely emotionally disturbed students who disrupt classrooms and (2)students with learning disabilities who may need a more highly focused, less distracting learning environment than that presented by the general education classroom.

MAJOR QUESTIONS REMAIN UNANSWERED

Major questions remain unanswered involving funding, access, equity, and the federal role.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for asking us here today to discuss our work on inclusion programs. In an inclusion program, sometimes called a "full"-inclusion program, all students, no matter what disabilities they may have, are taught in a general education classroom. In such a program, a disabled student attends his or her home school with age and grade peers and, to the maximum extent possible, receives in-school educational services in the general education classroom.

Inclusion programs have been the response of some districts to meeting the needs of children with disabilities under education reform and the national Goals 2000 initiative,[1] which set high standards for all children. If inclusion programs become widespread, the 3.2 million students with disabilities who are assigned to segregated special education classrooms could be affected. Whether or not this is a good idea makes this issue in special education one of the most hotly debated, high-visibility issues in the education of students with disabilities.

You asked us to review special education as it relates to our earlier work on education reform efforts.[2] You wanted us to focus particularly on models for elementary schools. Specifically, you asked us to answer these questions: When states include students with disabilities in reform efforts, how are the special needs of these students addressed? Do parents and teachers believe the needs of students with disabilities are met by inclusion programs? Do the approaches differ by severity of disabilities? In addition, we found information on other areas, including how progress is measured; costs; and major legal, administrative, and policy issues.

To determine how disabled students are included in education reform efforts, we spoke with experts in academia, government and interest groups, and Department of Education officials, and visited districts[3] in California, Kentucky, New York, and Vermont, considered leaders in education reform. These districts are all grappling with inclusion programs. In each state, we talked with state officials and asked them which districts had model inclusion

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[1]Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994.

[2]Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993) and Regulatory Flexibility in Schools: What Happens When Schools Are Allowed to Change the Rules? (GAO/HEHS-94-102, Apr. 29, 1994).

[3]San Diego and Napa, California; Burlington, South Burlington, Winooski, Barre, Montpelier, and Morrisville, Vermont; Johnson City, New York; Kenton, Jessamine, and Boone Counties, Kentucky.

programs. Our assumption was that the challenges faced in these model districts would be the minimum faced by any district. In addition, model programs might also provide insights into what other districts needed to do to implement their programs successfully. Within each district, we visited elementary schools. In addition to observing students in these schools, we spoke, either in groups or individually, with their administrators, instructional staff, students, and parents. We also incorporated related information gathered for other GAO work on education reform.

In summary, we found that inclusion programs can work, but they take tremendous effort and considerable resources. Some of those with whom we talked--parents of students with disabilities, parents of nondisabled students, teachers, and administrators--were generally supportive of these programs because of the positive effects observed for the students with disabilities, their nondisabled classmates, and school staff. But the necessary levels of effort and resources may not be possible for many districts. A number of educators and parents we talked with gave the following advice to districts attempting inclusion programs: Go slow. Let me explain why.

BACKGROUND

Inclusion, Mainstreaming, and the Federal Role

Inclusion programs are the least restrictive environment on the continuum of services described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These environments range from residential schools, on the most restrictive end of the continuum, to the general education classroom,on the least restrictive end.

Inclusion programs differ from mainstreaming, which usually means that a student receives instruction in a separate classroom for the disabled, but participates in some specific activities within the general education classroom. Such a student is considered primarily a member of the traditional special education classroom and the responsibility of the special education teacher.[4] In inclusion programs, however, the general education teacher is responsible for the education of all of his or her students, and the teacher needs adequate support to make education work for everyone in the class.

To help provide this support, the Department of Education plays an important role for inclusion programs, as it does for other education programs for students with disabilities. The

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[4]Inclusion: A New Service Delivery Model, San Diego City Schools, Stock No. 41-T-0100 (San Diego, Calif.: 1992-93).

Department's fiscal year 1994 estimated budget for special education was for $3 billion, but it accounted for only about 8 percent of the total cost of educating individuals with disabilities. The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides financial and technical assistance to states and districts in designing and establishing inclusion programs, as well as in monitoring program quality. This office administers the Systems Change Grants program, which allocates funding to help states build, in ways that fit their particular circumstances, their capacity to deliver effective services and achieve program improvements. One way is through inclusion programs. Eighteen states--including California,[5] Kentucky, New York, and Vermont--are currently receiving $4.4 million in inclusion program grants.

Parents, Some District Officials, and Courts Lead Movement for Inclusion

In the districts we visited, education reform[6] had, as its starting point, a philosophy of education and high standards for all students. Kentucky included students with disabilities from the beginning of its education reform efforts. Other states did not, despite using words like "all students" in their statements of philosophy. Many parents pushed for inclusive education, which they felt was better for their children socially and academically. Some were parents of students with disabilities who saw the word "all" and took it to encompass their children as well. Some were parents of students with severe disabilities who had been in segregated classrooms and schools. Some were parents of students with disabilities who were spending some time in general education classrooms under mainstreaming provisions. These parents felt that as long as their children were segregated or only visitors to the general education classroom, they would be isolated from the community; have no role models among their peers for normal, socially acceptable behaviors; and be excluded from exposure to the

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[5]California stopped receiving these grants in 1992, but now uses another grant program administered by OSEP, the Outreach Program for Severe Disabilities, to help fund its inclusion programs.

[6]For further information on education reform, see, for example, Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993) and Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O'Day, "Systemic School Reform," Politics of Education Association Yearbook 1990, pp. 233-67. As defined by Smith and O'Day, systemic reform involves not only the key components of the system, but all levels of the education system--national, state, district, and school. Systemic reform sets high standards for all students, allows substantial flexibility for teachers, and holds the system accountable for student outcomes relative to the standards.

richness of the curriculum and all of what could be learned in a general education classroom.

These parents were not the only ones with this perception. Some districts officials, like those in Johnson City, began--as a district decision--to bring back their disabled students from segregated classes. These officials saw that their treatment of disabled students was at odds with their general philosophy of education.

In other districts, court cases drove the movement for inclusion programs. Courts have held that schools that receive federal funds under IDEA must provide free, appropriate public education to students with disabilities. This requirement has been interpreted by the courts as a preference for the least restrictive environment. The schools must therefore make sure that a student with disabilities is in such an environment. This means that a school must make sufficient efforts to meet the student's needs in a general education classroom. If such a classroom cannot meet the student's needs, then, and only then, can the school place the student in a segregated special education class. In evaluating whether a school has made sufficient efforts to accommodate students with disabilities, the courts have been weighing, first, the potential academic progress to be achieved by the student with disabilities; second, the possible negative effect the inclusion of such a student with disabilities might have on the education of other students in the regular classroom; and, third, those unique benefits the student with disabilities may obtain from integration in a regular classroom, such as potential social benefit, stimulation of linguistic development, or appropriate role models provided by classmates. In one case, the courts have concluded that lack of sufficient support and services could be the reason for a student's behavior problems--the reason the school wanted a segregated placement originally![7]

However, not everyone is an advocate of inclusion. The right to a free appropriate special education was only guaranteed about 17 years ago. Some parents and special education experts are suspicious of a change in the basic presumption that students with special needs should be in special classes. Some parents, teachers, and special education staff have warned that school systems may want to adopt inclusion as a way to save money, without regard to the appropriateness of inclusion programs to meet the needs of specific students or providing teachers the necessary resources and training to make these programs work.

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[7]Board of Education, Sacramento City Unified School District v. Holland, 786 F. Supp. 874 (E. D. Cal. 1992), aff'd, No. 92-15608, slip op. (9th Cir. March 1993); Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District, 789 F. Supp. 1322 (D. N. J. 1992), aff'd, 995 F. 2nd 1204 (3rd. Cir. 1993).

KEY CONDITIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In the districts we visited, parents, staff, and state officials perceived that the success of inclusion programs depends on attention being paid to creating and maintaining several key conditions: (1) a collaborative learning environment, (2) "natural proportions"[8] of students with disabilities in their local education setting, (3) adequate support--including large numbers of aides and training--for classroom teachers, and (4) a philosophical reorientation--defining special education as a service, rather than a place. When any one of these key conditions was unmet, inclusion programs were affected negatively. For example, Johnson City had successful inclusion programs going for 6 years. However, district officials told us that after the district was featured on national television last year, 60 students with severe disabilities moved into the district, creating an "unnatural" proportion of severely disabled students that has overwhelmed the district's resources.

Collaborative Learning Environments

An inclusion program relies on special education and general education professionals working together to produce a total school environment that works for all students. One goal of collaboration is to provide the general education teacher the needed assistance to modify a class lesson for a student with disabilities. Modifications might take different forms, depending on the needs of the students. Let us take as an example a sixth-grade math class studying a geometry lesson with story problems. If there is a wide discrepancy between the cognitive abilities of the disabled student and the level at which the class is working, the curriculum could be modified so that the disabled student could learn something about the topic being covered at his or her own level: for example, a student who was functioning on the kindergarten level in this sixth-grade class, might work on identifying triangular objects and counting the number of sides and angles of a triangle. Another student, with a severe reading disability but above-average intelligence, might listen to a tape of the same story problems assigned to the class and be required to do the math like the other students.

Another aspect of collaborative learning environments is joint planning by general and special education staff. The ability to do joint planning on a regular basis is dependent, in part, on levels of support. In some districts, where a large percentage of students were in inclusion programs, parents and school officials said, schools had a number of special education staff at the

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[8]That is, the number of disabled students, on the basis of geography and demographic expectations, who would normally be going to a school.

schools for the entire day. This accessibility enabled collaboration between the special education teachers and the general education teachers on a daily basis, if needed. On the other hand, at one district, the general education teachers did not have access to the daily consultation support they believed they needed because the special education teachers were overburdened and responsible for many students at numerous different schools.

Yet another aspect of collaborative learning is that between parents and the teaching staff. Some parents told us of the need, at times, to take a more active part than usual in the Individualized Education Program (IEP)[9] team or to act as an expert resource for teachers. For example, one parent worked collaboratively with her child's teacher, spending hours every night adapting materials for her child for the next day's lessons, because there were not enough staff to do the necessary adaptation.

Levels of Support

The percentage of students with disabilities served in inclusion programs varied enormously, although the districts we visited were similar in their philosophy and commitment to inclusion. Variations in resources available for support--particularly from aides and special education teachers--can affect how many students can be in inclusion programs. When there is much support, a large percentage of students can be placed in such programs. For example, Vermont districts included 83 percent of their students with disabilities in general education classes. California districts we visited included less than 5 percent. Vermont districts, as well as Kentucky districts and Johnson City, New York, had several trained special education teachers in each school, as well as many aides; it was not unusual to see three or four adults working with a class of 25. In contrast, the San Diego School District had an itinerant special education teacher working with 15 severely disabled students at 12 schools scattered across a broad geographic area.

The amount of support affects not only the percentage of students in inclusion programs, but the ability to handle students with behavioral problems. Adequate support makes the difference between difficult-but-quite-manageable problems and "impossible" problems. For example, one fifth-grade teacher stated that inclusion was stressful for her because a student had severe behavioral problems and she, the teacher, only had a part-time aide. If she had a full-time aide, she said, the aide would be

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[9]The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that every identified student with disabilities have an IEP developed specifically for him or her. The act also requires that the plan be developed according to specified criteria and adhere to specified due process procedures.

able to assist when the student acts out and allow the teacher to keep the rest of the class on track. Without the aide, the teacher must focus her attention on the student who is acting out, to the detriment of the rest of the class.

The inclusion programs we visited developed naturally out of school reform efforts. But most school districts cannot as yet supply the key conditions, such as a collaborative learning environment. In such states, interestingly enough, the impetus to expand inclusion programs for students with disabilities would now drive the education reform efforts, some educators we spoke to felt.

PARENTS AND TEACHERS GENERALLY SUPPORTIVE OF INCLUSION

In spite of the challenges and huge effort needed to implement inclusion programs well, those we spoke with--parents of students with disabilities, parents of nondisabled students, teachers, and administrators--were generally in favor of inclusion programs because of the positive effects observed for the disabled students, their nondisabled classmates, and school staff. Inclusion gives disabled students the opportunity to have good peer role models and be exposed to a broad curriculum. The nondisabled students had generally accepted their classmates with disabilities, those we spoke with noted. The nondisabled became more compassionate, more helpful, and more friendly in relating to the disabled students.

The greatest gains for the disabled students, parents and teachers stated, have been in the areas of social interaction, language development, appropriate behavior, and self-esteem. According to some parents and teachers, students with disabilities have also made some academic progress. One parent was initially told by psychologists that her severely learning disabled daughter would never be able to function in a general education classroom. The school placed the daughter in a self-contained classroom, mainstreamed only for music, gym, and lunch. However, after her family moved, she went to a new school where she was placed in a general education classroom. Not only did she do well academically, but her self-esteem improved dramatically. She participated in school activities and even ran for student council treasurer. She was not afraid to take risks--something that never would have happened, her family thought--had she remained in a self-contained classroom.

INCLUSION PROGRAMS DO NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Placement in an inclusion program, district and school staff said, depends on the individual needs of the disabled student and not on the severity or type of disabling condition. Although many severely disabled students are successfully placed in inclusion programs, people we talked to agreed that inclusion programs are

not for all disabled students. For example, a parent of a severely disabled child was dissatisfied that his son was recently enrolled in a general education classroom at a neighborhood middle school. He stated that his son was not gaining any benefit, either socially or academically, by being at this school. In fact, it has been a detrimental experience because the other children taunt his son. Previously, his son was at a separate school for students with severe disabilities. The parent wants his son back in a special school, but both special schools in that district were closed after the district placed the students with severe disabilities in neighborhood schools.

In addition, all districts are struggling with the challenges of meeting the needs of both severely emotionally disturbed students who disrupt classrooms and students with learning disabilities who may need a more highly focused, less distracting learning environment than that presented by the general education classroom. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders, many school officials stated, are the most difficult to include in a general education classroom because their behavior can be disruptive to the class.

Parents also share this concern. For example, one parent said that her child, with a psychotic disorder and severe retardation, has always been placed in a self-contained class. According to this parent, her child should never be placed in a general education classroom because of the child's violent behavior--pinching, biting, and throwing things. More broadly, parents and teachers have expressed great concern over the possibility of districts or states making across-the-board decisions for whole categories of students with disabilities, without reference to individual needs. For example, despite the concerns of school officials and parents, the San Diego School District has mandated that all learning disabled students will attend their neighborhood schools for the next school year (1994-95).

ASSESSMENTS AND COSTS: DISTRICTS GRAPPLING WITH BOTH ISSUES

Education reform, as articulated in Goals 2000, must include definitions of educational goals, standards for student achievement, and performance-based assessments, which would determine if students meet the standards. Currently, voluntary national standards are being developed and some districts and states are developing their own. This is true of the districts we went to. Even in subject areas where standards have already been defined there is a debate: Should there be only one acceptable performance standard for a grade or subject area? Should standards vary depending on individual student needs?

Most districts and states we visited--except Kentucky--are still attempting to develop standards and performance-based

assessments. Consequently, there are no standards yet to compare with a student's IEP. These districts and states varied in the extent to which they included students with disabilities in current state assessments. Some of this variation is due to state assessment policy. For example, Kentucky mandates state testing for all but the most disabled, except for homebound and hospital-bound students. But New York specifically exempts disabled students from this testing.

Views on the costs of inclusion programs also vary. Although our study has not yet systematically compared the costs of inclusion programs with the costs for traditional special education classrooms, we have found some cost-related information and can share with you several preliminary observations. Administrators in districts that have implemented inclusion programs have different views on the costs. Some say they save money, some say they spend more, and others say the costs are about the same.

Some district officials have reported savings from inclusion programs because the programs eliminate the transportation costs of busing students to special schools, outside their neighborhoods. Other district officials stated that inclusion programs could be more expensive to administer because adequate support services and materials have to be available at many schools, rather than concentrated at one. However, in Vermont, officials estimate that the costs remained about the same.

MAJOR LEGAL, ADMINISTRATIVE, AND POLICY ISSUES SURFACED

In our discussions with school officials, academicians, parents, teachers, and policy analysts, major legal, administrative, and policy issues related to the education of disabled students surfaced, particularly as to funding, access, equity, and the federal role.

(1) Funding: As districts create entirely new ways of serving all students, what happens to special education funding? Can funds be commingled with Chapter 1[10] and other funding? Who is responsible for providing special education services? What kinds of funding formulas produce the best inclusion programs? In states like Minnesota, experimental charter schools[11] are legally separate

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[10]The federal program to help economically disadvantaged students.

[11]Charter schools take many different forms. In it's "purest" form, a charter school is an autonomous entity that operates on the basis of a charter, or contract, between the individual or group (e. g., teachers, parents, others) which organizes the school and its sponsor (e. g., a local school board, county or state board). They are generally given freedom from government requirements and held accountable for student outcomes.

from local school districts, but must rely on them for a portion of funding. Vermont found it had to redo the state funding formula so that it did not favor segregated placements.

(2) Access and equity: What if a student with disabilities wants to participate in one of the new charter schools? Does such a student have access--with appropriate support--to all charter schools? Conversely, what about a special education charter school that is designed for a specific population of students with disabilities?

(3) Federal role: What do we do with federal funding formulas and other regulations that are categorical and may work against education reform and inclusion programs? What form should federal technical assistance take? To what extent should the federal government be funding staff development programs for all teachers of inclusion programs? Will the federal government allow state and local administrators to pool teacher training funds, or must these funds also remain categorical? What role does the federal government play in creating standards and assessments?

CONCLUSIONS

With all these unanswered questions, unknown cost implications, lack of standards and assessments, and the difficulty of creating key conditions necessary for successful improvement programs, it is understandable why the people we spoke with said "Go slow." Our study shows that the relationship between special education inclusion programs and education reform is a reciprocal one. Those districts that embarked on education reform early are creating educational systems that respond to the diverse learning needs of all their students. But for those school districts facing the challenges of education reform, increasing violence, teen pregnancy, non-English-speaking populations, family disintegration, and decreasing resources, implementing inclusion programs will be particularly difficult. As I said at the start of this testimony, it appears that inclusion programs can work for some children, but they must be implemented carefully.

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Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared statement. At this time, I will be happy to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

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